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Does woman + a network = career progression?

Question: I am an ambitious and talented junior manager who has recently been hired by FAB plc, a large multinational company. I am also a woman and, as part of my induction pack, have received an invitation to join FABFemmes - the in-company women's network. I don't think my gender has been an obstacle to my success thus far and so I don't really feel the need to join. But on the other hand I don't want to turn my back on something that might offer me a useful source of contacts to help me advance up the career ladder. What would be the best thing to do? - Ms. Ambitious, UK

Introduction

Women's networks have become the latest 'must have' accessory in the campaign to get women past the glass ceiling and into more leadership roles. These networks have been variously presented as: a response to the ongoing exclusion from informal male networks, a positive developmental activity or useful tool for organizations committed to valuing 'diversity'. Official support for the existence and growth in numbers of such networks is wide and enthusiastic. The case for women's networks as a tool in achieving organisational equality has been repeated in reports by the Equal Opportunities Commission (Miller and Neathey, 2004), Demos (McCarthy, 2004) and Opportunity Now (Vinnicombe, Singh and Kumra, 2004). Following the lead given by these reports many women have joined such networks and meet regularly with female colleagues either in their own organisations, industry or geographical region. But the membership of women's networks is not universal and there is little sign of a consensus amongst women as to whether network membership is an essential aspect of advancement into leadership positions. Women show a degree of ambivalence (at best) and hostility (at worst) to women's networks. Many fear that their membership will draw the sort of comments already directed at women seen in same-sex conversations in the workplace - the references to 'mother's meetings' or 'Women's Institute gatherings'. Others resist joining women's networks because they object to the implied narrative of victimhood that they believe underpins the networking initiatives or because they prefer mixed-sex networks (McCarthy, 2004).

The call to join and participate in network activity is just one of the many made on the time and energy of women in work. And, if anything, the response to the (embarrassing) lack of women occupying leadership roles has been a surfeit, not a deficit, of advice as to the best way to get ahead. From mentors to business cases to fashion advice to networking and much more, women are left in no doubt that the solutions to persistent discrimination in the workplace are theirs to grasp and to implement. The 'how to' leadership literature peddles a simplistic, but seductive, line – the key to overcoming barriers to women's career progression is to identify the barrier and then implement an appropriate winning strategy. As a result, the advice to women in terms of networks has necessarily been of the "if you can't join them, beat them" variety. But we know from research that networks are complex and the advantages of membership both difficult to measure and distributed unevenly. Is it time that women (and leadership) took another look at the evidence for networking so we know how to answer the questions that Ms Ambitious, and others of her generation, are asking of us?

What are women's networks and why might we need them?

There are different types of women's networks and it is important to recognise those formed since the 1980s represent a particular and historically situated response to inequality in organisations. Earlier women's networks i.e. those that represented women in a particular

industry or based on other women's organisations such as the Women's Institute, even if they survive into contemporary times, are usually marked by the conditions of their own founding. For example, women's business networks formed in the immediate post-war period still place a strong emphasis on the training and development opportunities available to membership. In an era where managerial training for women was not widely available women's networks offered many women the opportunity to gain experience in chairing meetings, budgeting, marketing and debate (see Perriton, forthcoming). Groups representing women in different industries and professions often appeared soon after women gained entry into roles previously denied them by custom or formal prohibitions, connecting women who were isolated in their male-dominated workplaces but able to access the women's network for external support. As Mehra, Kilduff and Brass (1998) observe, the relative rarity of a group in any given context (social or professional) is likely to promote members' use of that group as a basis for shared identity and social interaction and these early professional networks functioned in this way. Women's networks of this ilk often took an interest in promoting and educating the next generation of women by the provision of career advice and raising awareness of employment opportunities.

In contrast to the collective orientation of earlier women's networks contemporary forms are seen as mechanisms to advance the individual. A recent paper defined networks as:

... in-company networks, or formally sponsored and structured groups concerned with women's advancement. **Women's in-company networks typically help women build skills and create knowledge to succeed in organization culture.** They are sponsored by the employer organization and function to advise senior management, hold networking events, and create mentoring programmes. (Bierema, 2005: 208 emphasis added)

Women's networks formed in the last 15 years or so are inextricably linked to the belief that networks increase access to information, which can be used instrumentally in accelerating or building leadership careers. The above definition is predominantly concerned with in-company networks but women's networks have also been formed at industry level and often define themselves geographically to cover businesswomen within a specific local or regional location. Examples in the UK of in-company networks are Women in BP, BT Women's Network and Citigroup (which represents women within Citigroup). Industry or profession-based women's networks probably have the longest pedigree and include such groups as Women in Dentistry, Women in Journalism and Women in Banking and Finance. More recently there has been a revival of the wider women's network attempts such as Women in Management (formed in 1969) with the arrival since 2000 of Aurora Women's Network and Thinkingwomen on the network scene. At this similarly general level women in the US have joined together to form 'girl gangs' (Logue, 2001) to act as informal personal and professional support groups. There is also a raft of *international* initiatives such as WorldWIT (WIT stands for Women. Information. Technology), which is a regional and network for women who can interact at traditional events or via online discussion groups. These newer groups have eclipsed, in number and type, the much older and established organisations that represent women in business such as the International Federation of Business and Professional Women.

On the surface it is difficult to reconcile the greater participation and representation of women in the workforce, the increased availability of training and the reduction in feminist identification generally with the *increase* in the number of women's networks. But this results from a reading of women's networks as a spontaneous, and positive, expression of sisterhood rather than a defensive response to the *absence* of equality. For this current generation of women the instrumental network, designed to replicate a 'natural' advantage enjoyed by men, is yet another attempt to overcome persistent systemic barriers to women's workplace advancement. Yet the assumptions on which this movement is based – for all its pro-female rhetoric – are curiously gender neutral, none more so than the belief that it is the network that

confers advantage in this world, rather than the gender of the network member. But it has long been observed by network theorists and researchers (Brass, 1985) that, even when included in networks, women do not benefit from them in the same way as men. Indeed, the network literature contains within it as many reminders of the ways in which networks reinforce gender differences as the leadership literature has to the ability of networks to overcome them.

Men and informal networks

There have been various explanations put forward as to why men and women appear to gain different career outcomes from networking. Brass (1985: 328) has summarised the different positions in the following way:

- That the problem is fundamentally one of inexperience and ignorance of organisational life on the part of women.

Women, in this view, don't realise that they need networks and have an unrealistic expectation that reliance on formal structures will result in their advance into leadership roles.

Even if one takes the most charitable view of this perspective and interprets it as an identified need for mentors within organisations, the inference that women (after many decades of managerial experience) still don't 'get' the reality of organisational life still grates a little. The evidence is that far from being handicapped in this area women possess all the necessary skills to build informal networks (Brass, 1985) – they just don't deliver the same benefits as those enjoyed by men.

- It is only relatively recently that men and women have worked alongside each other as social and economic equals. As such we are still evolving 'rules' for organisational behaviour and, in the absence of a well-established pattern of male/female interaction, men and women will prefer to continue to form networks with their own gender.

Research shows that the tendency for men and women to form networks within their own gender is a predictable and enduring one rather than as a result of under-evolved social awareness. The picture that emerges is that, left to their own devices, individuals will form ties with those who share similar characteristics in terms of gender, education, race and religion. Seeking out so-called 'strong' ties (in the sense that they are likely to be multi-faceted relationships from which individuals interact via advice-giving, support and friendship as well as simply information or contact) is especially prevalent where individuals perceive themselves to be a minority. In this context individuals will seek out those who are similar across organisational or geographical boundaries. This tendency is supported by Ibarra (1993) who wrote, "if women ... desire network contact with members of their own identity group, they are likely to have to reach out further than their own organizations, beyond their immediate peers, superiors, subordinates, or functional areas..." (1993: 67) and best illustrated, as indicated above, by the professional women's networks formed in the 20th century inter-war period. These organisations linked the small numbers of women working in the professions after the passing of the 1919 Sex Disqualification Act.

- Men - as the most dominant group in most business organisations - work to maintain that dominance through the act of intentionally excluding women from their informal interactions.

This last explanation - the deliberate and knowing exclusion of women from important informal networks by men¹ - has become a popular explanation in the 'glass ceiling' literature for the lack of women in leadership positions, presented alongside a narrative of masculinist organisational cultures. However, most research of this type has not directly examined the networks in question but has instead relied on survey or anecdotal reports of perceived exclusion (Ibarra, 1993). In contrast to the 'glass ceiling' literature, network researchers are more cautious in ascribing the absence of women from male informal networks to *knowing* acts of exclusion. Some network researchers go so far as to suggest that there is very little choice inherent in the networks in which men and women find themselves in adulthood. Earlier structural forces such as network position within education, kinship, voluntary and friendship groups will act on individuals to provide an alternative explanation as to how men and women come to inhabit different positions within employment networks (Smith-Lovin and Miller McPherson, 1993). This has led to some optimistic predictions such as those of Moore (1990), who sees the existence of separate male and female networks as a temporary phenomena arguing that as more women move into paid employment the composition of male and female networks will converge.

But, as the push to form women's networks shows, women who believe they are deliberately excluded from male networks are not prepared to wait around for them to be opened up in the same way they have waited for legislative measures to deliver structural change. Women have created their own instrumental networks in an attempt to recreate the male advantage using female resources. Whilst the outward trappings of such networks might deceive the casual onlooker into thinking that these meetings – billed as seminars and featuring guest speakers – are educational, the true underlying objective is to provide opportunities to enlarge “the directory of professional contacts available to their members, and to spur women into using those contacts in an instrumental manner” (McCarthy, 2004:29), mainly via the exchange of business cards. This strategy has been heavily promoted by national and regional women's business networks and heralded as the new solution to inequality. But can it really just be a matter of distributing your business card to other women? How can concepts taken from the network literature help us understand what is happening (or failing to happen) when women form networks with the aim of gaining career advantage?

Network theory concepts

Network theory defines a network as consisting of a set of nodes and the relations linking them. Nodes can be organisations but by far the most common analysis of networks are undertaken with individuals acting as nodes. When a single individual is taken as the focus and starting point of analysis the network is described as an 'ego network'. The relations (or ties) between nodes (individuals) are usually described in terms of their *transitivity* (i.e. do the people that X likes, like each other?), *reachability* (does person X have a tie to someone who has a tie to person Y?), *centrality* (how easily can X 'reach' all the people in the network?) and *vulnerability* (what would happen if person X was removed from the network?) (Smith-Lovin and Miller McPherson, 1993: 225).

There are different forms of networks that occur within organisations. There are *prescribed networks*, which are predominantly those that are dictated by your work-role, "a set of formally specified relationships between superiors and subordinates and among representatives of functionally differentiated groups who must interact to accomplish an organizationally defined task" (Ibarra, 1993: 58). And there are *informal networks*. Informal networks "involve more discretionary patterns of interaction, where the content of relationships may be work-related, social or a combination of both" (Ibarra, 1993: 58). Whilst the networks themselves are either prescribed or informal, the nature of the relationships

¹ Although this paper focuses on the male-female dynamic it is undeniable that networks of powerful men can also feel exclusionary to other men (especially in relation to class, status, ethnicity, age, religion, disability, etc etc).

between individuals in both networks is described as *instrumental* or *expressive*. Instrumental ties covers a broad range of interactions including an exchange of job-related resources, information, expertise, and professional advice and also extend to provide career direction and guidance, access to senior management and advocacy for promotion. Expressive ties are relationships that involve the exchange of friendship and trust in addition to those ties that are purely instrumental (Ibarra, 1993).

The advocates of women's networks hold that in order for women to attain leadership roles they will need to build and exploit informal and instrumental relationships. The belief that we not only choose the networks we are part of but also how we utilise them is entirely consistent with the idea of an emergent leader identifying, and then consciously pursuing the behavioural strategy that will deliver success. We can see the same assumptions about conscious choice being made in the belief that membership of all-male networks and the benefits that accrue from them are assumed to be deliberative acts. This in turn creates the justification for the formation of all-women networks where individuals are encouraged to see others as sources of information for self-interested career projects.

But networks are much more complicated than this. Granovetter (1973; 1976; 1983) has commented on how difficult it is to understand how extended networks operate, their significance to the wider structural aspects of society and how these magnify the effectiveness of network membership and the nature of the ties we have. Within network theory itself opinion is divided as to whether we can even claim that the two genders make different network decisions, with some theorists holding to the idea that networks are constitutive of gender and not the end product of gendered choices.

An important focus for network research - especially in relation to how an individual might benefit from networks in relation to obtaining leadership roles - are the issues of network density and homophily. Density is often presented as the proportion of possible ties among individuals in an ego network. A density measure of zero would indicate that none of the individuals know each other and range to possible unity where each individual is closely tied to all others (Smith-Lovin and Miller McPherson, 1993). But density is also used to denote the mean intensity or strength of ties amongst individuals - this is especially relevant to Granovetter's (1973) findings that career benefits are likely to accrue from networks comprising weak ties.

The heterogeneity of a personal network measures the diversity of persons an individual can contact within his or her interpersonal environment. "High diversity indicates contacts with multiple spheres of activity; a diverse network allows one access to information from multiple, non-overlapping sources, which researchers have found to be advantageous for instrumental purposes like finding a job..." (Smith-Lovin and Miller McPherson, 1993: 226) So, following the logic that women are denied access to networks that are essential in gaining leadership roles because of their sex, we can see women seeking to create their own heterogeneous networks by providing similar opportunities (via all-women business networks) in order to further their own career projects. "Hurrah for women!" we might think. But does the existing research into women's networks suggest that there is cause for celebration?

Existing research on women's organisational networks

Ibarra (1992) points out the scant amount of empirical work done to that point on women's organisational networks. Although the work that did exist provides evidence of informal institutional barriers to women, she claims, "this body of research has lacked well-developed theoretical explanations for differences in network access and has not clearly specified network types" (423). But whilst calling for more empirical and theoretical work to be undertaken in the area - especially in understanding the consequences of observed differences

in men and women's networks (Ibarra, 1992) - her work does suggest that we should be cautious in the claims we make for women's networks. In common with Brass (1985) Ibarra concludes that whilst it might be going too far to suggest that women are wasting their time in participating in women's networks their time might be more beneficially spent developing greater ties to their (white) male colleagues (Ibarra, 1992: 441).

The key to understanding why women might get more of a return on investment in building ties with men, rather than women rests in the concept of social capital. As an explanatory framework, the idea of social capital has traditionally lost out to human capital in the leadership and management literature. The story of human capital holds that inequality results from differences in the abilities of individuals – the people at the top of organisations are simply smarter, or are better educated or more experienced than the people underneath them in the organisational hierarchy (Burt, 1998). But social capital

...predicts that returns to intelligence, education and seniority depend in some part on a person's location in the social structure of a market or hierarchy...Certain network forms deemed social capital can enhance the manager's ability to identify and develop opportunities. Managers with more social capital get higher returns to their human capital because they are positioned to identify and develop more rewarding opportunities. (Burt, 1998: unpaginated)

The sociological literature too adds to the weight of the pro-network argument by its emphasis on so-called 'structural holes', where the hole refers to a gap in the social structure and people on either side of the hole participate in different information and resource communities. An individual who can bridge these structural holes i.e. bring together two different information flows can gain referral benefits (being ideally placed for inclusion in new opportunities) or control benefits (determining whose interests are served by that bridge) (Burt, 1998). Managers who seek out structural holes and position themselves as bridges are labelled 'entrepreneurial' and we know from empirical research that men who can capitalise on their position in this sort of network prosper in terms of career success. So far, so familiar - as the previous sections have established most advocates of women's networks understand that networks are ways of accessing resources and information outside of the social group that you find yourself in and that women need to seek out structural holes and become a bridging mechanism.

But what is not appreciated is that this entrepreneurial strategy of building your own social capital is interpreted positively within organisations when followed by men, but negatively when practiced by women. Burt's (1998) research tracing the network membership and career progression in a US computer and electronics company suggested that where an employee had 'legitimacy', a strategy of building capital was successful but where employees were viewed as 'illegitimate' players then they gained more from a strategy of borrowing social capital. Burt's point is that social interaction and behaviour hinges on assessments of who is an insider and who is an outsider.

In the interpersonal politics of competition, legitimate members of the population ...are twice advantaged. Investors are more likely to believe they understand the motives and probable actions of someone like themselves, which means they feel more confident in predicting the future behaviour of [people like themselves]. Second, it is easier for investors to trust [people like themselves] because his or her reputation amongst us will be tarnished investors are treated poorly. (Burt, 1998: unpaginated)

Burt's research found that women who formed entrepreneurial networks were promoted late relative to their human capital. Women who borrowed social capital, by building links with a strategic partner who was already connected to disconnected groups within the firm and

beyond were promoted early. Burt's explanation for this difference was that women – as a group – lacked legitimacy within the organisation because, compared to the historically white male senior management group, they were 'suspect outsiders' (Burt, 1998: unpaginated). It therefore benefited women to find a male sponsor within the organisation, the association with whom would signal legitimacy. Put simply, if you aren't one of them then you have to find one of them who will vouch for you and act as your guarantor by the risk to their own reputation if you do not perform.

Company leaders don't have time to check into the credibility of everyone making a bid for broader responsibilities. They are looking for fast, reliable cues about managers on whom they do not already have information. A manager deemed suspect for whatever reason – a new hire, someone just transferred from another country, a new addition to a cohesive group – needs an established insider to provide the cues, sponsoring the manager as a legitimate player to open the mind of a contact not ready to listen seriously to the manager's proposal. (Burt, 1998: unpaginated)

McGuire (2002) makes the same point about trustworthiness in relation to the benefits received by network members according to gender and race. McGuire uses status characteristics theory to explain the empirical evidence for men and women gaining different outcomes from network membership. She claims that women are perceived by other network members as poor or risky investments of their time, reputation and resources "because of cultural beliefs that ranked them below that of white men ... network members may have believed that their helpful efforts should be directed at white men, whom they perceived as having the potential to be successful" (2002: 316). The rather depressing message from McGuire's research is that despite having similar network structures and even when occupying the same management levels, women will receive less network benefit because of existing cultural norms.

Her research challenges the traditional gender *and* race blindness of the corporate network literature. McGuire has found that white and black women receive less network help than white men. Black men are affected by status characteristic assumptions in the early stages of their career, when they are building human capital and seeking out prominent assignments but, once established in a powerful position, they gain the same network advantages as white men. However for black and white women "there appears to be a level of acceptance that they cannot achieve even when they hold the necessary credentials and occupy powerful positions" (McGuire, 2002: 317).

Despite the weight of empirical evidence pointing to the importance of building ties with influential men in a network it shouldn't be read as encouragement for women to avoid network ties with other women. Many of those in Ibarra's study reported that they sought out other senior or successful women in order to talk with them about the interpersonal and behavioural strategies for overcoming structural barriers. Indeed, women rated as 'high potential' by their employers, regularly sought out other women for psychosocial support and as role models (1997: 99) and emphasized the importance of close ties, trust and a genuine basis for relationships in describing how they went about forming networks (Ibarra, 1997). This, in addition to the findings of how individuals choose homophilous ties as the basis for friendship and support, means that it would be unlikely that women wouldn't interact with other women in the workplace. But what is clear from the research is that "a balanced mix of ties to men and women is more likely to provide an array of network benefits than contacts drawn predominantly from either group" (Ibarra, 1997: 93). For example women may find social support amongst their own gender and seek instrumental sponsorship from influential male network members.

The evidence from empirical research on networks suggests that women are not only aware of the need to form ties with male colleagues but are also active in trying to do so. Ibarra (1992)

found that women show a differentiated choice pattern in their voluntary ties - on average they identified a greater proportion of men than women in their network as representing ties of advice and influence and identified a near-equal proportion of men and women as ties of communication and support. Only when asked to describe friendship ties did the balance shift decisively in favour of women. However, women continue to occupy (relative to men) junior managerial and functional roles and this results in women being less central in informal communication, advice, friendship and influence networks. As a result they struggle to achieve the centrality in networks, which is unsurprising given that rank usually correlates with centrality (Smith-Lovin and Miller McPherson, 1993).

Lack of centrality has two effects. The first is that women are restricted in their informal contact with what Brass refers to as 'the dominant coalition' within organisations (1985: 34). Access to this leadership group was strongly related to promotions in his research. The second effect is that although it is perfectly rational for women to wish to form instrumental network ties with the men in the network, there is little incentive for men to want to reciprocate. Because of their position "[t]he network resources reached through women are relatively poor, regardless of the strength of the ties" (Ibarra, 1997: 440). Brass's (1985) research suggested that, surprisingly, there *were* organisational mechanisms through which women could compensate for their lack of informal contact with the dominant coalition and this was by being part of mixed work groups. When compared with women in all-female workgroups, women in integrated workgroups scored significantly higher on the following measures: supervisors' ratings of influence; centrality in subunit and department interaction networks; access to the dominant coalition; contacts with others beyond the immediate workgroup; and centrality in the all-male network. Women in the integrated workgroups also had more critical positions than women in segregated workgroups. (Brass, 1985: 336)

The cumulative logic of the research presented above is to question the central assumption of women's networks, which holds that women need to replicate networks of heterogeneous and weak ties to help them gain leadership positions. Ibarra's (1992) call for more research in order to explore the conditions under which strong and weak ties provide network benefits or disadvantages to women and to investigate optimal combinations of each has been answered. Subsequent research has discounted Lin's argument that weak ties, because they are the ties most likely to connect people of different status, are the only available access routes to resources for low-status individuals (i.e. women). But it appears that weak ties of the type that would be formed in most contemporary women's networks give little benefit to those who lack legitimacy or occupy insecure positions. Weak ties therefore work well for men's leadership trajectories but are less advantageous for women (Ibarra, 1992), which should (at the very least) make us question the return from attending networking events or swapping business cards. Because women are not fully trusted or accepted at the higher levels of the managerial hierarchy they require additional strong ties to strategic partners in order to signal their legitimacy and help secure their advancement (Ibarra, 1997). Women who want to use networks instrumentally to gain access to over-lapping networks and to information need strong ties to key nodes who are central to weak tie networks (Ibarra, 1992). This might also explain why the high potential women in Ibarra's (1997) study stressed the importance of close ties and trust (i.e. a strategy that also sought expressive ties) in their networking behaviour.

Yet perhaps what is sauce for the corporate goose is also sauce for the gander as well. What the emphasis on women's networks should alert us to – quite separate to the question of whether they work or not – is the importance of the idea of networking to leadership. So what does leadership have to gain from the network concept?

Location, Location, Location

Leadership research's interest in networks is two-fold. Leadership, by its nature, is the study of individuals in relation to one another and the influence that can be exerted through the tie. Leadership is therefore particularly attracted to the ability of network theory to map "the complexity of the social context by identifying leaders in relation to their social position, status, and influence in a particular social setting" (McElvoy and Shrader, 1986: 353). In addition to mapping relationships it is also interested in networking as a necessary leadership competence. Being 'a networker' is a behavioural skill that is highly regarded – simultaneously considered as a sign of being socially successful and of having a commitment to a recognised career strategy. Unfortunately, neither of these intersections of leadership and networking theory is without consequence for how women are perceived in organisations.

Leadership's interest in the concept of centrality in networks is a result of its assumption that individuals that are central to any given network have the highest potential access to (and control over) resources (McElvoy and Shrader, 1986). Centrality of network position is likely, given the above assumptions, to be equated with leadership. However, as noted previously, centrality is often the result of rank (Brass, 1985). Thus in terms of leadership research there is very little to gain in terms of insight in mapping the position of those in sanctioned leadership roles already. The focus instead is on those individuals who are centrally positioned in the network but do not hold formal leadership roles – these individuals are considered to be significant in the sense that others affiliate with them by choice, tipping researchers off to emerging figures of influence, prestige and power (i.e. leaders).

The corollary of this sort of analysis is that it also identifies 'isolates' in the network, meaning a person that neither sends nor receives ties. In the words of McElvoy and Shrader, "...a person occupying this position cannot be central or influential in a network...Moreover, because of the isolate's lack of influence and prestige, his or her descriptions of others should carry little weight and have few consequences for those being described" (1986: 355). There are no prizes for those on the fringes of networks, nor are they to be given an organisational voice. It is clear from the discussions above regarding women's peripheral involvement in male informal networks how women are likely to be rendered 'invisible' in this sort of leadership research. There is a certain circular logic to the study of leadership and networks and one that, unsurprisingly, leads seamlessly to the women's network 'solution'. The (optimistic) view of networking concludes that as leaders are found at the centre of networks, centrality = leadership. Those at the edges of networks (often women, or low-status men) lack prestige and influence as a result of their perceived isolation and this deters more centrally positioned individuals from seeking out instrumental ties with them, further diminishing the likelihood they will be identified as emergent leaders. The answer therefore is to create an all-women network in order for (some) women to enjoy centrality, thus leading to leadership opportunities through information sharing. The alternative (more pessimistic) view of networking observes that men + centrality = leadership and therefore the better strategy for those on the fringes of a network is not to waste their time building networks that don't matter, and will never be seen as significant career arenas, but instead to seek 'sponsorship' from high-status individuals. Sponsorship will bring marginal groups into more central positions in the significant (and predominantly male) networks, even if it is by proxy.

The perceived need – for all potential leaders, regardless of gender - to build strategic alliances in order to access more advantageous network positions perhaps explains the growing emphasis on 'networker' behaviour as a leadership competence. Becoming a 'networker' is to develop the social habits which allow you to become competent in forming key relationships within your employment setting and that also allow you an opportunity to demonstrate your work-related skills. In this view merely joining a ready-made network is not enough – networking, in leadership terms, is valued only when it is judged to be a 'natural' behaviour and inherent skill.

“...networking is a behaviour to be internalised so as to constitute an aspect of identity. People are socialized into networking but networking is also a process of socialization. In one sense, the capacity of managers to network can be read as a sign that they are serious ... and have the capacity to operate at [a higher organisational] level. So not just the networking itself, but the very fact of being engaged in it is a pointer to the future”. (Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson, forthcoming: 16. emphasis in the original)

Networking may not only benefit the individual but is increasingly seen as a benefit to the organisation they belong to – allowing the flow of beneficial information into the organisation, whether that takes the form of insights into the market or sharing of best practice. However, the belief that a network is an individual *possession* can add an invidious new twist to employer (and employee) behaviour. If individuals are to be judged not just on their own merits but on the perceived access to new markets or resources that ‘their’ networks will bring to the organisation there is the very real danger that networks are viewed as employment dowries. This in turn encourages a form of careerist networking where the emphasis is constantly on impression management for external consumption. Whilst this might bring beneficial returns for the individual in terms of their ability to move (advantageously) between organisations it is unlikely that the return to the host organisation is realised to the extent they believe it might be.

Conclusions?

Debates within the network literature clearly have the potential to disrupt the rather cosy view of networks as seen from the leadership field. They are not quite as advertised in terms of their ability to circumvent structural disadvantages located as they are *within*, and not outside of, existing social structures and belief systems. Networks both reflect and determine existing gendered norms and their relationship to other systems of advantage and disadvantage. There is no simple way of overcoming the gender advantage held by one sex by recreating the behaviour (and social mechanisms) that exist for the other and assuming it will result in a level leadership playing field. Moreover, by continuing to promote women’s networks as a sure-fire career advancement mechanism, there is the danger that women will continue to expend effort in areas which bring them little return on their investment as well as helping to shore up existing attitudes to instrumental careerism that we would certainly be better off questioning rather than perpetuating.

So perhaps, in addition to answering the question posed by Ms Ambitious, we should ask a few more of our own...

Q. Who has more to gain by the creation of a women’s network within an organisation – the organisation or the individual? If the networking activities were more about campaigning against, as opposed to compensating for, equal opportunities failures would they still receive company sponsorship?

Q. As a representative of a minority group in your workplace is it more realistic to expect moral support rather than career advantage from your purpose-built network?

Q. What would happen if we thought about networks differently and saw men’s inclusion in such networks as a problematic weakness rather than women’s exclusion as the issue? Would being ‘a networker’ cease being a compliment in respect of leadership skills?

Q. What do we really gain by advocating the creation of women’s networks in this game of tit-for-tat instrumentalism? Do we broaden our understanding of how networks ‘work’ in relation to leadership, or impoverish it?

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